

Life of the Buddha

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According to tradition, the historical Buddha lived from 563 to 483 B.C., although scholars postulate that he may have lived as much as a century later. He was born to the rulers of the Shakya clan, hence his appellation Shakyamuni, which means “sage of the Shakya clan.” The legends that grew up around him hold that both his conception and birth were miraculous. His mother, Maya, conceived him when she dreamed that a white elephant entered her right side (1976.402). She gave birth to him in a standing position while grasping a tree in a garden (1987.417.1). The child emerged from Maya’s right side fully formed and proceeded to take seven steps. Once back in the palace, he was presented to an astrologer who predicted that he would become either a great king or a great religious teacher, and he was given the name Siddhartha (“He who achieves His Goal”). His father,

evidently thinking that any contact with unpleasantness might prompt Siddhartha to seek a life of renunciation as a religious teacher, and not wanting to lose his son to such a future, protected him from the realities of life.

The ravages of poverty, disease, and even old age were therefore unknown to Siddhartha, who grew up surrounded by every comfort in a sumptuous palace. At age twenty-nine, he made three successive chariot rides outside the palace grounds and saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse, all for the first time. On the fourth trip, he saw a wandering holy man whose asceticism inspired Siddhartha to follow a similar path in search of freedom from the suffering caused by the infinite cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Because he knew his father would try to stop him, Siddhartha secretly left the palace in the middle of the night (28.105) and sent all his belongings and jewelry back with his servant and horse. Completely abandoning his luxurious existence, he spent six years as an ascetic (1987.218.5), attempting to conquer the innate appetites for food, sex, and comfort by engaging in various yogic disciplines. Eventually near death from his vigilant fasting, he accepted a bowl of rice from a young girl. Once he had eaten, he had a realization that physical austerities were not the means to achieve spiritual liberation. At a place now known as Bodh Gaya (“enlightenment place”), he sat and meditated all night beneath a pipal tree. After defeating the forces of the demon Mara, Siddhartha reached enlightenment (1982.233) and became a Buddha (“enlightened one”) at the age of thirty-five.

The Buddha continued to sit after his enlightenment, meditating beneath the tree and then standing beside it for a number of weeks. During the fifth or sixth week, he was beset by heavy rains while meditating but was protected by the hood of the serpent king Muchilinda (1987.424.19ab). Seven weeks after his enlightenment, he left his seat under the tree and

decided to teach others what he had learned, encouraging people to follow a path he called “The Middle Way,” which is one of balance rather than extremism. He gave his first sermon (1980.527.4) in a deer park in Sarnath, on the outskirts of the city of Benares. He soon had many disciples and spent the next forty-five years walking around northeastern India spreading his teachings. Although the Buddha presented himself only as a teacher and not as a god or object of worship, he is said to have performed many miracles during his lifetime (1979.511). Traditional accounts relate that he died at the age of eighty (2015.500.4.1) in Kushinagara, after ingesting a tainted piece of either mushroom or pork. His body was cremated and the remains distributed among groups of his followers. These holy relics were enshrined in large hemispherical burial mounds (1985.387), a number of which became important pilgrimage sites.

In India, by the Pala period (ca. 700–1200), the Buddha’s life was codified into a series of “Eight Great Events” (1982.233). These eight events are, in order of their occurrence in the Buddha’s life: his birth (1976.402), his defeat over Mara and consequent enlightenment (1982.233; 1985.392.1), his first sermon at Sarnath (1980.527.4), the miracles he performed at Shravasti (1979.511), his descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (28.31), his taming of a wild elephant (1979.511), the monkey’s gift of honey, and his death (2015.500.4.1).

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